Low-income students may be first-generation, but Shonda L. Goward notes that convenient label does not adequately describe their challenges once they get to college, and after.

By Shonda L. Goward

First-Generation Student Status Is Not Enough: How Acknowledging Students with Working-Class Identities Can Help Us Better Serve Students

GREW UP POOR. It is quite easy for me to hide this fact now. I have advanced degrees. I belong to elite social organizations. I can talk to you about the lives of both my parents. But this was not always so.

I grew up poor. Not only a first-generation college student, but poor. First generation is a comfortable label that gets at one's temporary collegiate status, but a childhood of being poor stays with you. It is in your rearing, and it comes out when you are being your authentic self. Although I can wield words like "hegemony" with ease, I prefer the colloquial language from home that is a mix between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and street slang. These words are not welcome in my professional work spaces, and although I have AAVE in common with other African Americans, my street slang is a "tell" among the African American upper class that I am not, to paraphrase writer Lawrence Otis Graham, their kind of people.

I say it out loud and often—poor. Single mother, at times whole-family-living-with-grandparents poor. This is very different from just going to college and not understanding how the university system works. This meant not being sure whether I would eat even after I graduated and got a "good job," because that good job at a large cable network paid only $7 per hour. I had no

safety net available to keep me afloat. Thus, while I recognize that being a first-generation student is something that institutions should acknowledge and support, I also recognize that the term "first generation" ignores the fact that for much of its history, the academy has kept out the poor masses, and only invited a few behind its gates on scholarship.

When we acknowledge poor students, like me, we also bring into relief whether our institutions have supported low-income students, and if not, we give them an opportunity to do so. By discussing wealth inequality in the United States, we put the onus on oppressive systems that we can hopefully break by educating the poor and affluent alike. Our campuses are places where the greatest and least of us should belong.

The Trouble with Labels

LABELLING LOW-INCOME STUDENTS PRIMARILY as first-generation college students is, first, wildly inaccurate, and second, contains the fear of poverty to the college environment. While low-income students may also be first-generation, first-generation students may not always be poor. To put it into context, the children of retired NBA standout Kobe Bryant are first-generation college students. The conflation of first-generation and low-income student status confines the dread of poverty to not understanding how to "do" college. However, growing up without does not stop at the edge of a college campus.

Research on graduation rates reinforces that while there is overlap between first-generation and low-income students, there are important differences between these labels. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 30 percent of all college students in the United States are the first in their families to attend college. Linda DeAngelo, Ray Franke, Sylvia Hurtado, John H. Pryor, and Serge Tran, researchers at the University of California Los

Angeles, find that only 27.4 percent of the first-generation students who begin college graduate within four years, and only 50 percent will graduate in six years. These numbers are even lower for students born into the lowest socioeconomic quartile. The NCES Education Longitudinal Study of high school students who were sophomores in the spring of 2002 found that only 14.5 percent of low-income students earned a bachelor's degree eight years after what should have been their initial year of collegiate enrollment.

While these numbers demonstrate that the coupling of first-generation and low-income students is insufficient, many campuses still host programs that combine these populations. By primarily focusing on first-generation college students, we may not be asking the right questions about a specific population of students for whom we wish to increase graduation rates. The challenges that a wealthy first-generation student may have are likely to be very different than the challenges of a student who is both low-income and first generation.

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A Focus on Social Class and Lived Experience

MY OWN RESEARCH AND EXPERIENCE has also taught me that first-generation student status does not

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fully convey students' social class or lived experience. For some of us, growing up low-income shapes our actions and how others interact with us for all of our lives. Being low-income often comes with shame and, sometimes, resentment for the financial struggle we experience. I currently have students who go home on the weekends to jobs as pharmacy technicians or McDonald's managers because they pay far better than work study positions, or even worse, unpaid internships. Some students attempt to earn positions in their fields but have trouble getting in the door even with stellar resumes because they are not connected to the upper-class people who are typically the gatekeepers for such roles. Post-graduation it can be difficult to find a peer group when you cannot afford to travel, or go out as often and spend money socializing. To compound the problem even further, low-income students do not have family members that can provide startup funds to help them start out in life. Most often every dollar goes into getting started as a college graduate with a credential that is supposed to garner a better life. What's more, the poor person's relationship to money can also make it difficult to define their true worth when looking for full-time employment. I have accepted salaries that were beneath my education and experience level because it was a slight promotion, and that small increase in income was better than having a job offer rescinded. It is also hard to demand your worth when you are used to needing so much and asking for so little. It is difficult to take up space.

For many years, poor students remained silent, largely because of shame. But some students are starting to tell their stories of being poor in the academy. In particular, they've shared how unwelcome they feel on campus—particularly at selective institutions. In a 2013 blog post in the *Huffington Post*, Duke University student Kelly Noel Waldorf discussed being poor at an elite institution and how she felt stigmatized as lazy and unmotivated. Kavitha Cardoza of *The Washington Post* profiled Washington, D.C., student Christopher Feaster, who was accepted to Michigan State University but eventually stopped out. His decision to leave was due to finances, the campus culture, and concerns about his mother, who had recently moved out of a homeless shelter. Despite his full academic scholarship, Christopher became so depressed and overwhelmed with his new surroundings and concern for his mother at home that he began staying in his room. After one year Christopher ended up back home in Washington. While the article frames Feaster's challenges as those of a first-generation college student, a follow-up piece by Cardoza for *WAMU 88.5* radio described Feaster's difficulty finding membership into a community on the large campus, despite joining a fraternity. Research shows that a sense of belonging is particularly related to race, gender, class, and sexuality. Cardoza's article noted:

> He [Feaster] had attended a small high school where he knew everyone and all his classmates were minorities like him. But Michigan State has more than 37,000 undergraduates and three out of every four students are white. He wasn't familiar with things like the clothing brands other students talked about, and on the flip side, no one understood his D.C. slang.

What Cardoza did not examine, however, is why Feaster was unable to find belonging with the few people of color on campus—a barrier I ascribe to social class. Sadly, I understand his predicament all too well. When I attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) as an out of state student from the West Coast, I stuck out like a sore thumb. UNC's undergraduate population of African American students hovers around 8 to 12 percent of the 20,000 undergraduates at any given time. Many of the African American students I attended college with came from middle-class to wealthy families and attended great high schools with advanced classes. Though I did rather well in my high school, I realized that my school did not measure up, and it made me doubt my right to be at such a prestigious institution. At the time there was little discussion of social class on campus, so rather than celebrating aspects of my upbringing, I saw them as a deficit.

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Low-income students often continue to struggle post-graduation even when they seem to represent the ultimate success story. One young woman I worked with was heralded by the university as the face of low-income, minoritized student achievement. She graduated with a near-perfect grade point average and did everything the education gospel told her to do: go to college, get good grades. She came to see me multiple times to discuss what to do now that she had successfully completed college because the gospel ends with persistence to degree and does not discuss how a family's economic status may constrain low-income

students' choices about what kinds of jobs they can take after graduation. Fortunately, this student found a position that she is really excited about that allows her to influence education policy. Unfortunately, that position is in an expensive metropolitan area, and yet again, money is a problem.

Making Connections and Celebrating a Working-Class Identity

IN MY DISCUSSIONS WITH STUDENTS, I have shifted from talking about myself as first-generation and moved toward sharing with students how I grew up poor and culturally identify with the working class. This class "coming out" has often led to deeper conversations with students about their lives and what challenges they are facing. I do not look askance at them if their accents are deep, and I deeply comprehend how little things like not having basic science classes offered at a high school can make students feel inadequate in their college classrooms. I understand what it is like to have to leave school to attend the funeral of a friend back home who died from gun violence.

When I tell my students that I worked three jobs throughout school and found a way to balance my coursework, they light up. Finally, someone has shown them that not everyone has it all together and that hustling for work and meals is not just a problem they have. I talk to them about my friends who also struggled in college and tell them what we are all doing now to demonstrate that it gets better if they are able to persevere and graduate. I also tell them that even 19 years post-graduation, and with two graduate degrees, my life is still carrying the challenge of being poor in college every time I log-in to Navient to pay my student loans, which total $900 per month. My students accept tough love from me about their behaviors and habits that hinder their academic progress because they know I get how hard it is. My very presence on campus as a doctoral degree holder demonstrates for them that they can push through and succeed.

As my conversations with students have demonstrated, the lessons of working class life are ones that should be venerated and celebrated rather than euphemized. Hiding behind the language of first-generation student status does not show students that the lessons they learned growing up are useful to them in the future. There is a reason the phrase "say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud" resonated with so many people. It allowed an entire community to embrace who it was rather than downplay it in an effort to fit in. The working class has no such rallying cry. The idea of the American Dream is that everyone has the opportunity to achieve prosperity in the United States. The subtext of the American Dream is that if you have not achieved this prosperity, then you must not be worth much. Another prevailing idea is that the working class is limited to the hardworking residents of the heartland, and everyone else who is poor is merely lazy. Universities should be the very place that these ideas are discussed and challenged. I hope that we as educators and members of society work with low-income students to find pride in their social class status and use their experiences to their advantage.

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Helping students identify with the working class is not just about semantics: It is also about politics. The middle and upper classes are proud of who they are, and they lobby their state and federal representatives for educational policies that benefit them, such as 529 educational savings plans. I believe that if we encourage low-income students, they may lead the way in organizing the working class. At present, there is shame around being poor; thus, poor people's voices are lost when harmful legislation, such as cuts to federal Pell Grants or increases in student loan interest rates, is proposed by Congress. In *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*, on political involvement and socioeconomic status, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady show that political activities such as attending a protest, engaging in community activities, and contacting elected officials rise with an increase in socioeconomic status. A subsequent book by the same authors, *Unequal and Unrepresented: Political Inequality and the People's Voice in the New Gilded Age*, states, "Organizations of the poor themselves are extremely rare, if not nonexistent, and organizations that advocate on behalf of the poor are relatively scarce" (p. 321). While there are many reasons for poor people to not participate politically, such as time spent working, I would also argue that part of it is how our culture has

stigmatized being poor. The working class has a great deal to gain from embracing its identity and organizing collectively, especially across racial lines. We in the academy have to do a better job at encouraging them to do so.

Constructing Working-Class Identity on Campus

I AM UNSURE WHY SOCIAL CLASS is not included among diversity and inclusion initiatives, particularly at elite institutions. While many institutions embrace geography as a part of their initiatives, this approach seems to be another proxy for class—especially when it includes programs for rural students. By talking about *place* rather than income inequality, universities are able to boast that students come to campuses from all over, which is a benefit to the university rather than the students themselves. Discussing class identity instead focuses the conversation back on the needs of our diverse student bodies.

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In one of the earliest articles about sense of belonging for marginalized students, Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Faye Carter found that without membership in a campus community, marginalized students are less structurally included into their campuses. In addition, Sara Goldrick-Rab's article in *Sociology of Education* stated that students with significant financial challenges have a multi-institution trajectory. Without connecting to one institution, and feeling a sense of community there, low-income students are less likely to graduate, or make the connections needed to find work if they do graduate. By at least naming the "thing" instead of euphemizing it by only talking about first-generation status or geography, we can do our part to help these students find the areas of strength they can use to persist and work with our campus communities to rethink the norms and values that validate middle-

and upper-income students and leave out a large group of students.

Embracing Intersectional Identities

IN ADDITION TO OVERTLY NAMING and examining low-income status, we must also acknowledge the ways that intersecting identities further impact and complicate a poor student's persistence. When reading about social class, I often see researchers talk about people who are minoritized *or* low-income; they rarely mention those who are both minoritized *and* low-income. The recent work of Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter is important for practitioners to understand because it details how no matter their class, black boys become men likely to be impoverished. Educators often assume that upper-middle-class and upper-class minoritized students have the same experiences as their non-minoritized counterparts. This thinking misconstrues financial means and comfort as a balm to racial injustice. In their working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, Chetty, Hendren, Jones, and Porter discussed that even when black families start out their children with a middle-class or upper-class life, racism will often rear its head, particularly for black men. Their article, "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective," combined Census Bureau data and tax information and found that black men born into rich families are more likely than white men to become poor as adults. When we consider this information alongside NCES data from "Graduation Rates Component" that demonstrates that the six-year graduation rate for black men at nonprofit institutions is 37.5 percent, we know that our campuses are not adequately supporting black men—no matter their socioeconomic status.

As educators, it is also important for us to analyze data using an intersectional perspective. For example, where data are broken down by race and gender, such as graduation outcomes, time to degree, ratio of "D," "W," and "F" grades in generation education courses, Pell eligibility should also be included to evaluate trends. Furthermore, similar to promoting intersectional research among faculty and students, data should be analyzed intersectionally. Many institutions are data rich but still have gaps when it comes to student success. At my current institution, we have the Carolina Covenant, which is a financial aid package and program that provides a debt-free education to low-income students. The six-year graduation rate for students in the Carolina Covenant program is 86 percent, which is only four percent lower than the university as a whole.

However, the graduation rate for black males in in our program is 70 percent; while we recognize that this number is strong in comparison to the national average, we also know that better than the average is not good enough. In order to begin closing this gap, I recently won a grant from ECMC Foundation, in conjunction with the University Innovation Alliance, to create a support program for low-income, black males as they enter our campus. Had we not spliced the data to look at gender, race, and class, we would not have discovered the need for this program.

Low-Income Student Support in Practice

I AM SURE THAT MANY CAREER ADMINISTRATORS have fantastic stories of working with individual low-income students and supporting them when they face financial hardship. However, supporting large groups of students brings into focus the extent of the challenges of poverty. Students are food insecure, supporting family members back home, or trying to go to school and support a family. They also come with the general problems of humanity, such as domestic abuse, but lack the resources to change it. The best we can offer is a way to survive whatever challenges the student is having while at school, which is exactly the problem with focusing on the first-generation aspect of their lives, and not the low-income part.

Taking a step even further, universities, particularly elite institutions where there are fewer low-income students, should be examining their own policies and procedures to determine if they are hindering low-income students from focusing on their studies.

Brown University has been lauded for establishing one of the first centers to focus on first-generation and low-income students. What I find most interesting is that the website for the center indicates that students were the ones who pushed for the inclusion of low-income students. Students need a place to discuss how being low-income affects them on campus and off, and universities have to be open to hearing those stories. Taking a step even further, universities, particularly elite institutions where there are fewer low-income students, should be examining their own policies and procedures to determine if they are hindering low-income students from focusing on their studies.

My current university has both a first-generation initiative and the Carolina Covenant. Although sometimes students are confused as to which program staff they should see, they quickly find my office in the Covenant program suite when they need funding for summer break between semesters, meal vouchers, off campus mental health services, and miscellaneous gap funding when the unexpected arises in their lives. Even if they never attend a program my office facilitates, the ability to fill in financial gaps makes a large difference in whether students make it from semester to semester. Since the Great Recession of 2008, the number of students who qualify for this program has steadily risen. Although my institution has been fortunate in being able to maintain the program over 15 years, other institutions have closed their debt-free programs because demand exceeds the budget. The declining value of Pell grants alongside rising tuition means that more of our students are financially insecure, are borrowing heavily to make it through, or are working more than 20 hours to afford school. My institution has been fortunate, but I am deeply concerned about students around the country. We are starting to see some relief with states adopting free college mantras. As these programs expand, and I hope they do, I hope institutions also begin having conversations about what it means to be an institution for all.

While the challenge of being a low-income student is largely financial, it is also tied to our systems and policies. For example, I recently worked with a student who had stopped out. It took us nearly six months to resolve several issues and get him enrolled. This student had completed all of the paperwork the previous summer to receive a loan for summer school, but an error on the part of the university prevented those funds from being disbursed. Thus, he owed a significant amount of money and could not enroll in classes in the fall. Despite this being a university error, this student did not come to ask me, or anyone else, for assistance with the matter until he realized he could not earn enough to pay the debt on his own and also pay his rent. By the time he reached out for help he had already been sent to university collections.

Whereas the more affluent students ask how exceptions to policy might be made to accommodate them, rarely do low-income students stop and question

whether higher education is built to truly support them. In fact, poor students seem to tie their struggle with the system to who they are as people or the families from which they come. When they do recognize that the issue might be their college and not themselves, their attempts to change the system can become daunting in the face of needing to work and go to school. Additionally, low-income students are often asked by family and friends at home to mask their college identity so that others do not feel like they are putting on airs. On one hand, most parents are extremely proud of their children for going off to school. On the other hand, families sometimes become concerned about what their students are learning and worry that they will adapt to the ways of their middle- and upper-class peers and no longer have use for them.

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Shared Struggles and Lessons Learned

THE CHALLENGES STUDENTS MOST OFTEN STOP by the Carolina Covenant office for, with an appointment and without, are financial first and resource- or information-based second. In order to deal with the difficulties of being low-income, students have to find the money to eat and shelter themselves; then they can focus on their academics. My students visibly exhale when I say to them, I have been where you are, at this exact university, and I am going to help you. They know I get it because I have shared my story. They know that I am on the other side and still have struggles. I have

had to make some tough career choices, but I have taken the lessons I learned from my mother about how to pinch the very essence of a penny and live a pretty great life helping the next generation advance. I rarely talk about being a first-generation student. I always talk about being a poor one.

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